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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6220
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0174
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7155
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5262
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3810
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1057
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3882
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1115
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2967
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7743
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5405
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0233
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2105
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000824

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND PM
MCC FOR S GROFF, D TETER, D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/11/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRIME MINISTER EXPRESSES REGRET FOR
TAMIL DEPORTATIONS

REF: A. COLOMBO 809

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 820

[1](#)C. COLOMBO 805

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Over the weekend, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake publicly expressed "regret" for the deportation of Tamils from Colombo lodges and hostels. On Saturday June 9, approximately 160 Tamils who were forcibly deported from Colombo to Vavuniya returned to Colombo on the same police buses that took them away two days earlier. What happened to approximately two hundred other Tamils internally deported on June 7 remains unclear. President Rajapaksa asked Police Chief Victor Perera to investigate who was responsible for the deportations. (Note: the Ministry of Defense, which is overseen by the President's brother, Gothabaya Rajapaksa, issued the verbal order to carry out the removals.) Perera reiterated his claim that the Tamils left voluntarily. Embassy received a report that police officials went to at least one Tamil lodge to extract an affidavit from the owner that the occupants left at their own request. As embarrassing as the episode proved for the government, in Embassy's view there is a positive side to it, in that Sri Lanka's political and civil society institutions finally stepped up to their responsibilities. Parliamentarians, non-governmental organizations, media outlets and the judicial system combined to thwart the attempt by hard-liners within the administration to expel non-Colombo based Tamils. This demonstrated that Sri Lanka's democratic institutions can still provide a check to unbridled executive power. END SUMMARY.

SOME TAMIL DEPORTEES ALLOWED TO RETURN TO COLOMBO

12. (C) At approximately 6:30 a.m. Saturday, June 9, two buses carrying roughly 160 Tamils arrived in Colombo from Vavuniya, returning just 48 hours after being loaded onto police buses for forcible removal (ref A). However, about two hundred other Tamils who were also rounded up on June 6 and 7 from Colombo lodges and hostels remain unaccounted for, including some who remained behind in Vavuniya, and others who were transported to Trincomalee. The GSL has not yet indicated whether they will also be allowed to return to Colombo in accordance with the Supreme Court's order.

GSL APOLOGIZES FOR TAMIL DEPORTATIONS AND ABUSES

13. (C) On Sunday, June 10, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake held a press conference with Ministry of Defense spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella and military spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe in which the Prime Minister stated in reference to the deportations: "It was a big mistake. As the government we express our regrets to the Tamil community." Rambukwella was uncharacteristically quiet during the press conference, perhaps not wishing to be questioned about his statements the previous day to the effect that the Tamils left voluntarily and with gratitude toward the government for providing free transportation (ref B). Wickremanayake expressed no caveats in his apology, stating, "We accept the responsibility, and the government must take the responsibility for all actions of officials, whether they are good or bad." Wickremanayake also apologized for the two Tamil Red Cross employees killed on June 1 (ref C) and the discovery of nine bodies of abducted Tamils in Wennapuwa on Friday June 8, stating that, "The government should take responsibility for all of these."

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POLICE FEELING THE HEAT, ATTEMPT TO COVER THEIR TRACKS

14. (C) On Saturday June 9, President Rajapaksa publicly requested Police Chief Victor Perera to investigate who was responsible for issuing the order to round up Tamils and transport them outside Colombo. As has been widely reported, however, the order came directly from the President's brother, Gothabaya Rajapaksa following a National Security Council meeting (ref B). Perera, perhaps understanding that Gothabaya was not going to take the blame for the blunder, reiterated the Government's now discredited explanation that all of the Tamils left voluntarily. Embassy contacts reported to us on June 10 that police officers returned to one of the Tamil lodges, Angel Inn (strictly protect), and forced the owner to sign an affidavit stating that those Tamils staying in his lodge left "at their own request."

DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS SHOW SIGNS OF LIFE

15. (C) COMMENT: The entrenched "culture of impunity" in Sri Lanka has flourished under the Rajapaksa administration. However, this time, traditional democratic checks on executive power sprang to life and forced the government into a painful retraction. Even the Sinhalese chauvinist Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peranuna (JVP) aligned with the main opposition party, the United National Party and the main Tamil party, the Tamil National Alliance, to condemn the deportations. Moderate members of the ruling coalition refused to publicly support the Government, or even threatened to withdraw from the coalition if the deportations continued. The government-owned Daily News and its vernacular versions were the only major newspapers supporting the official rationale that Tamils left voluntarily. Virtually all other media outlets lambasted the government and provided ample space to critics of the move. Civil society leaders mobilized activists in Sri Lanka and internationally to apply pressure. The Supreme Court, once

thought to be nothing more than a rubber-stamp for the administration's nationalist policies, stayed the Ministry of Defense order on the grounds that it violated the Sri Lanka Constitution. The combined pressure forced the government to backtrack almost immediately and issue an unequivocal admission of error and apology. The democratic voices' success will likely embolden administration critics in the future, and will make the government think twice before applying such coercive methods in such a public way again.

BLAKE